

DUAL GRATING ASSISTED OPTICAL COUPLER

Field of the invention

The present invention relates to the coupling of light between two waveguides with dissimilar refractive indices and/or with dissimilar geometries. Examples of such coupling of light include coupling between an optical fibre and a thin semiconductor waveguide, and coupling between semiconductor waveguides of differing dimensions (for example where one of the waveguides comprises a photonic bandgap structure).

Background of the invention

The optical coupler between two different waveguides is an essential part of an optical system where the lightwave from one optical component is coupled into another component. For example, a low-loss coupler between an optical fibre and a waveguide is crucial for successful implementation of integrated optics in optical fibre communication systems. The difficulty increases when attempting to couple from a fibre to a waveguide with a large refractive index difference between the core and cladding of that waveguide. An example of such a waveguide is a silicon waveguide with silicon dioxide cladding, or indeed some other semiconductor waveguide. Direct coupling of these two waveguides (the fibre and the semiconductor) results in high coupling losses because of very different geometries and refractive indices (fibre diameter $\sim 9\mu\text{m}$, refractive index ~ 1.45 ; waveguide thickness $\sim 1\mu\text{m}$, refractive index > 3).

As miniaturization in integrated optics, as in microelectronics, brings a number of advantages, there is a need for the coupling of light to/from very thin semiconductor waveguides with thicknesses, for example in the range $0.1\mu\text{m}$ (or smaller) to $1\mu\text{m}$ (or larger). It is difficult to efficiently couple light from optical fibres to such waveguides. The present invention seeks to enable robust and efficient coupling for this and other cases, using a novel form of grating-assisted directional coupling.

Grating-assisted directional couplers (GADCs) are fundamental guided-wave components in some distributed feedback lasers, distributed Bragg reflector lasers, optical wavelength filters and wavelength division multiplexing devices. A typical known GADC is shown in the accompanying Figure 1, and consists of two waveguides, a and b , a grating region, and a separation layer (with height h_1 and refractive index n_1). The purpose of this coupler is to enable power transfer from one waveguide to the other, over a minimum grating length and with maximum efficiency. The grating enables matching between propagation constants of two interacting waveguide modes that exchange optical power. However, if the overlap of the two optical fields in the structure without the grating present is very poor, introduction of the grating will not improve the coupling efficiency significantly.

To couple optical power from an optical fibre to a thin semiconductor layer, without the aid of any additional optical element, the power must be coupled first to the thick upper waveguide with refractive index very close to the refractive index of the fibre (waveguide b in Figure 1) in order to achieve very small insertion loss. From this waveguide power is coupled to the thin semiconductor waveguide (waveguide a in Figure 1). The large difference between these two waveguides in both thickness and refractive index makes the task very difficult to solve.

A single theoretical paper that has dealt with such a problem using a grating-assisted directional coupler, studying the coupling of light between a glass waveguide and a semiconductor waveguide (the latter with refractive index of ~ 3.2), is J.K. Butler *et al*, "Grating-assisted coupling of light between semiconductor and glass waveguides", *J. Lightwave Technol.*, vol. 16, pp. 1038-1048, 1998. In this theoretical work, the maximum coupling efficiency, for TE polarisation, could be only 40% for optimised waveguide and grating parameters. For a change in the grating period of just 0.3nm coupling efficiency drops by almost 50%, making the

fabrication of this grating-assisted directional coupler extremely difficult to realise, and impractical for commercial applications.

Brief summary of the invention

A first aspect of the present invention provides an optical coupler comprising an input waveguide, an intermediate waveguide, an output waveguide, a first grating situated between the input and intermediate waveguides, and a second grating situated between the intermediate and output waveguides such that, in use, light propagating in the input waveguide is coupled into the intermediate waveguide with the assistance of the first grating, and thence is coupled into the output waveguide with the assistance of the second grating.

It is to be understood that the direction of propagation of light through the optical coupler preferably is reversible, so that light propagating in the output waveguide may be coupled into the intermediate waveguide with the assistance of the second grating, and thence coupled into the input waveguide with the assistance of the first grating. However, for simplicity and convenience, the invention is described herein in terms of the coupling of light from the input waveguide to the output waveguide.

The coupler according to the invention therefore includes at least two gratings, and preferably includes only two gratings (the first and second gratings).

The coupler according to the invention preferably is a directional coupler.

Preferred embodiments of the invention may therefore be regarded as a "Dual Grating-Assisted Directional Coupler" (DGADC).

The invention has the advantage that the use of two gratings and the intermediate waveguide enables high coupling efficiency between the input and the output waveguides, which preferably have differing geometries and/or refractive indices.

The coupler according to the invention preferably is fabricated as a layered structure, for example of semiconductor and/or dielectric materials. Most preferably, the waveguides and gratings of the coupler comprise such layers. The layers preferably are fabricated by means of deposition or epitaxial growth and selective etching, a process which is well known in the art.

As indicated earlier, the coupler according to the invention may be used, for example, to couple light between two waveguides having differing geometries and/or refractive indices. Preferably, a first waveguide, for example an optical fibre, may be arranged such that light propagating therein is coupled into the input waveguide of the coupler (or vice versa). Consequently, the input waveguide of the coupler preferably is dimensioned such that at least one transverse (i.e. cross-sectional) dimension thereof (preferably the thickness of the input waveguide layer for embodiments in which the waveguides comprise layers) is of the same order of magnitude as that of such a first waveguide (e.g. an optical fibre). Additionally or alternatively, in order to avoid the use of additional methods of reducing insertion loss (for example anti-reflection coatings and the like) the refractive index of the input waveguide preferably is such that it is relatively close to that of the first waveguide (e.g. a silica optical fibre having a refractive index of approximately 1.45).

The output waveguide of the coupler may be coupled to a second waveguide, such that light is coupled between the first waveguide (e.g. an optical fibre) and the second waveguide, via the coupler according to the invention. It is generally preferred, however, for the output waveguide of the coupler itself to be the "second waveguide". That is, the coupler preferably is used to couple light between an external first waveguide (e.g. an optical fibre) and the output waveguide of the coupler. The output waveguide of the coupler according to the invention preferably is a semiconductor waveguide of an integrated optical device.

It was also indicated earlier that the coupler according to the invention may be used, for example, to couple between two semiconductor waveguides of differing dimensions. In such cases, the "first" and "second" waveguides (between which the coupler is situated) may be the two semiconductor waveguides of differing dimensions. Alternatively, the first waveguide may be the input waveguide of the coupler, and/or the second waveguide may be the output waveguide of the coupler. The first or the second waveguide may, for example, comprise a photonic bandgap structure.

Consequently, as will be apparent, the input and output waveguides of the coupler according to the invention preferably have differing refractive indices and/or at least one differing transverse dimension. ("Transverse" herein being transverse to the direction of propagation of the light, and including "vertical" as well as "horizontal" dimensions, i.e. any dimension that is cross-sectional with respect to the propagation axis of the waveguide.)

The intermediate waveguide of the coupler preferably has a different refractive index and/or at least one different transverse dimension to that of the input waveguide and/or the output waveguide.

The coupler according to the invention advantageously has lower insertion loss, higher efficiency and better tolerances of structure parameters than any previously published design. Therefore, unlike previous coupler designs, it can enable the successful fabrication of a practicable integrated device that has satisfactory performance.

A second aspect of the invention provides an integrated optical device comprising an optical coupler according to the first aspect of the invention, in which the input waveguide and/or the output waveguide of the coupler comprises a semiconductor waveguide of the device.

The semiconductor waveguide of the device may, for example, comprise a semiconductor laser or a photodiode (or other component) of the device.

A third aspect of the invention provides the use of an optical coupler or device according to the invention, to couple light between an external first waveguide and the output waveguide of the coupler, via the input waveguide of the coupler.

The external first waveguide may, for example, comprise an optical fibre.

Other preferred and optional features of the invention are described below, and in the subsidiary claims.

Summary of the drawings

Some preferred embodiments of the invention will now be described, by way of example, with reference to the accompanying drawings, of which:

Figure 1 (described above) is a schematic illustration of a conventional grating-assisted directional optical coupler;

Figures 2 to 4 are schematic illustrations of three embodiments of the optical coupler according to the invention;

Figures 5 and 6 are schematic illustrations of two embodiments of the optical coupler according to the invention for coupling light between an optical fibre and a silicon-on-insulator (SOI) semiconductor waveguide; and

Figure 7 is a schematic illustration of an embodiment of the optical coupler according to the invention for coupling light between a semiconductor laser and a large dimension waveguide or optical fibre.

Description of preferred embodiments

An example of a preferred embodiment of the invention is shown in Figure 2. The coupler comprises the following: an approximately 5 μ m thick input

waveguide layer 10 having a refractive index very close to the refractive index of optical fibre (resulting in very low insertion loss); a silica top layer 11; a first transitional layer 12 having a refractive index slightly less than that of the input waveguide layer 10; a first grating 31; an intermediate waveguide layer 30; a second grating 32; a second transitional layer 22; and an output semiconductor waveguide layer 20.

Light from input waveguide layer 10 is coupled to the intermediate waveguide 30 using the first grating 31, and subsequently to the output semiconductor waveguide layer 20 using the second grating 32. Coupling lengths and/or periods and/or depths and/or duty cycles generally are different for the two gratings. The profile of the grating is usually rectangular, but other grating profiles may be used. The refractive index of intermediate waveguide layer 30 generally must be larger than that of input waveguide layer 10, but less than the refractive index of the output waveguide layer 20. The intermediate waveguide layer 30 is crucial for the operation of the coupler device, because it enables highly efficient coupling occurring at both gratings, consequently forming an efficient DGADC. Layer 41 below the other layers serves for isolation from a substrate 40, strongly reducing radiation losses.

Two further embodiments of the invention are illustrated in figures 3 and 4. These embodiments are simpler in fabrication terms, but generally will function satisfactorily only if waveguide coupling is efficient in the grating regions but is less efficient elsewhere. For example, in both figures 3 and 4, the second grating 32 is used to couple light from the intermediate waveguide 30 to the output waveguide 20, via the second transitional layer 22. To the right (as drawn) of the second grating 32 however, optical modes in output waveguide 20 and intermediate waveguide layer 30 should not be phase matched in the direction of propagation (the z-direction as indicated), or light will generally couple from output waveguide 20, back into the intermediate waveguide 30.

In addition, for the embodiment illustrated in Figure 4, there should normally be substantially no phase match in the z-direction of the modes in input waveguide 10 and intermediate waveguide 30, in the regions where the first grating 31 is not present (i.e. to the right, as drawn, of the first grating 31). These constraints generally make the embodiment in Figure 2 preferable, even though fabrication may be slightly more complex.

Two embodiments of the optical coupler according to the invention, based on Silicon on Insulator (SOI) technology, are illustrated schematically in figures 5 and 6. Of course, the application of the invention is not limited to that example technology. In particular, III/V alloy semiconductor-based technologies (for example GaAs and its ternary compounds, or InP and its quaternary compounds) or lithium niobate or related compounds can also be used.

To demonstrate the performance of the present invention, it is instructive to make a comparison with the J.K. Butler *et al* paper referred to earlier. The embodiments of the invention illustrated in figures 5 and 6 (which normally will be able to couple light to even more dense and thinner semiconductor layers than the coupler disclosed in the Butler *et al* paper) have a total theoretical efficiency, for TE polarisation, approaching 100%. Taking into account potential fabrication difficulties, the coupling efficiency of the figures 5 and 6 embodiments can generally exceed 90% (coupling loss can, for example, be as low as 0.4dB). The tolerance for the grating period has been calculated (by the inventors of the present invention) to be significantly higher than in the Butler *et al* coupler. Fabrication tolerances of the layer thicknesses and refractive indices, as well as the depths of the gratings, generally are not critical, and therefore the present invention enables the fabrication of practicable devices, rather than being merely a theoretical study.

The specific embodiments of the invention disclosed herein may be varied in many ways while retaining one or more of the features of the coupler. For example, the approach can be applicable to any homogeneous and isotropic material-based technology (SOI, GaAs, InP etc). Layers 10, 11 and 12 may, for example, be formed from glass, for example phosphosilicate glass, especially such glass having several percent by weight of p-type dopant. The waveguides may be of the rib, planar, strip or embedded type, for example.

The optical coupler according to the invention will normally have a good spectral selectivity, because of the presence of two cascaded gratings. This selectivity can be varied, for example by using chirped or apodized gratings with appropriate windows. It is also possible to make the coupler polarisation independent using a double approach, namely designing two completely different gratings in both coupling sections, one for TE and one for TM polarisation, or by using a double-periodic structure which may be viewed as a combination of two gratings with different grating functions. Alternatively some polarisation insensitivity can be introduced by chirping one or both gratings to broaden the spectral response of one or both gratings, and hence broaden the response in terms of the modal propagation constants.

Additional versatility can be introduced by making the gratings tunable. For example, by injection of carriers in a top waveguide or changing the temperature of the grating region, the refractive index in the region of the optical mode changes, modulating the effective index of the mode interacting with the grating, thereby making the grating tunable.

The invention can, for example, be used for the realisation of monolithic waveguide-detector systems, where a photodiode can be implemented in the semiconductor (see figures 3 and 4). Figure 7 shows a further embodiment of the invention in which the coupler can be used for integration of a semiconductor laser (layer 20 in Figure 7) and a glass (or

other) waveguide (10). An optical sensor could also be fabricated using the principle of Figure 7. For example, optical power from waveguide 20 can be coupled to waveguide 10. If waveguide 10 has a geometry and refractive index profile that results in a significant optical field (evanescent field) at the surface of the structure, or in layer 11, that field can be made to take part in sensing functions. Thus the sensing region is localised in the overall structure.

Although the invention has been described with reference to specific preferred embodiments thereof, many variations and modifications will be apparent to those skilled in the art. The appended claims are therefore intended to include all such variations and modifications.